

The New York Times

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Moving Beyond Bratton

By MALCOLM K. SPARROW

AUG. 8, 2016

WITH the impending departure of [William J. Bratton](#) as commissioner of the [New York Police Department](#), an important chapter in American policing is about to close. Mr. Bratton — with whom I have collaborated in a Harvard program on police reform — has served with distinction as commissioner in Boston, Los Angeles and twice in New York, the nation’s largest department and a trendsetter in the profession. Not surprisingly, police chiefs across the country are watching the Police Department closely to see whether, and how, it moves beyond Mr. Bratton’s policies.

In his first term in New York, 1994-96, Mr. Bratton introduced one of his most notable innovations: CompStat, the data-collection system that used analysis of crime patterns to drive crime-reduction strategies. Precinct commanders were held accountable for producing substantial reductions in reported crime. Those who succeeded were rewarded, while those who failed were pushed to the side. As a motivating and organizing device, it was a powerful tool that became widely imitated. In the view of many experts, the system contributed to lower crime rates in many cities.

But the system also had its critics, who warned that a single-minded focus on reported crime data was not enough. Driving down reported crime was not always appropriate because more approachable police officers who engendered greater trust might actually have caused increases in crime reports in some areas. And given the pressure to meet ambitious goals, the temptation to fudge statistics grew. Cheating on crime statistics is now a global problem, particularly in departments that adopt a singular focus on driving down crime rates.

Under Mr. Bratton, the department also established an aggressive and enforcement-centric “street-order maintenance” approach variously called “zero tolerance,” “quality of life” or “broken windows” policing. It became the default strategy for taking back streets from criminals, and enforcement numbers, as measured through arrests and tickets, were widely used as performance metrics.

Reported crime rates fell during Mr. Bratton’s first stint, and continued to fall for years afterward. But arrest and incarceration rates skyrocketed. And police-community relationships became more and more strained.

Mr. Bratton returned for his second term in 2013 still committed to zero-tolerance policing. But he also recognized the need for some course correction. Facing criticism over oppressive police conduct, particularly in minority neighborhoods, he scaled back [stop-and-frisk](#) — though not as much as many black and Hispanic leaders wanted — and emphasized the importance of restoring trust in the police. As the debate over police brutality escalated, including after the death of Eric Garner on Staten Island, he bolstered training in de-escalation skills. The department, he said, is transitioning “from being *the* police to being *your* police.”



James O'Neill, right, with William Bratton, at the press conference announcing Bratton's departure and O'Neill's promotion to commissioner. Credit Mary Altaffer/Associated Press

But actually delivering on that promise will now fall to his successor, James O'Neill, the chief of department, who will become commissioner next month. Mr. O'Neill has already declared his commitment to expanding a neighborhood policing program, with officers assigned to small areas to address local concerns, and restoring trust in the department. But what will it take to do that? How will he move beyond the Bratton legacy?

First and foremost, New York's police must make a renewed commitment to the ideals of community policing. That requires collaborating closely with residents to identify public safety priorities and then working with them to achieve the relevant results.

Second, the department must recognize that its mission goes beyond the mandate of preventing threats to life and property. As one leading scholar of policing, [Herman Goldstein](#), has written, it should include maintaining a sense of security, protecting civil liberties, facilitating the movement of people and vehicles, assisting the vulnerable (including the intoxicated, the addicted, the mentally ill and the physically disabled, old and young) and resolving conflicts.

Third, the department cannot be seen to protect officers who are corrupt, brutal or racist; and its disciplinary system must be demonstrably effective in rooting those officers out.

Fourth, it needs to master “problem-oriented policing”: spotting problems early and suppressing them quickly, before they do much harm, and before large-scale enforcement campaigns become necessary. This requires not just vigilance, but also organizational nimbleness, open-mindedness about methods and mastery of a wide range of policing tools.

These prescriptions, valid across the profession, were generally accepted as the core of a police-reform agenda as far back as the early 1990s. The puzzle we face now is figuring out why these ideas failed to thrive. New York’s heavy reliance on zero-tolerance policing and the CompStat system, and the fact that so many other departments followed suit, certainly played a role.

As the Police Department prepares to open a new chapter, it must acknowledge that the promise of those reform ideas has not yet been realized. We owe it to the public to try again.

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on August 8, 2016, on page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: Moving Beyond Bratton.
